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# SERBIA'S WESTMINSTER

BY HAMILTON FISH ARMSTRONG

SOUTH of Belgrade the old, old road of the Schumadia, one of the oldest highways of Europe, curves about the wooded slopes of a small mountain which has always been held in particular veneration by the Serbs as the abode of friendly spirits and one of the hunting grounds of the noble Kraljevitch Marko and Sharatz, his piebald steed. The history of Mount Avala is a summary of all the history of the Serb race, from early misty times when strange potentates made excursions thence to perform feats of wonder and bravery, down to the battles which raged along its fringe of woods during the Great War, the war which won for the whole South Slav race freedom and unity and, we pray, peace at last.

The Schumadia road is slashed and torn by the shells of invader and defender, and fiendishly rutted after years of unalleviated travel by heavy-laden ox-carts and careening camions. It swings around several bare hill-sides and desolate gorges, criss-crossed with trenches and spotted with the occasional spectre of some destroyed cottage or abandoned *gostionitza*,<sup>1</sup> before reaching the luxuriant woods, sweet with flowers and ankle-deep in wild strawberry plants, that clothe the sides of Avala. Ridge rises above ridge, but not so steeply that walking is unpleasant even on a Balkan midsummer afternoon. Grassy openings in the forest occur, and occasionally we cross or re-cross the broad winding road which a former inhabitant of Avala built the better to convey his spoils and captives to the stronghold on top.

Avala Castle perches just where it should, on the extreme top of the hill, with unobstructed views east and west, north and south, across miles of rolling country. From this height all grim traces of war disappear, the chimneys of scattered farm cottages seem again to give forth the friendly curls of smoke denoting life

<sup>1</sup> *Roadside café.*

and work, and the dun-colored Schumadia ribbon unwinds in great loops into the southern distance, to all appearance innocent of the gashes and bumps that make it so uncomfortable on closer acquaintance.

George Brankovitch, one of the last independent medieval princelets of Serbia, built this old fort, choosing a spot which tradition says had already been occupied by the strongholds of many chieftains. There is a story of how one of the proprietors of Avala (perhaps he was a Turk), being fond of the particular variety of bread baked at Semendria, a town on the Danube some twenty miles distant, and desiring it hot from the oven, stationed a row of servitors at three-foot intervals all the way from the bake-shop to his mountain top. The new-made bread was passed from hand to hand with great rapidity, and almost always arrived still fresh and warm. On the occasions when it did not arrive warm enough to suit the chieftain's taste the whole line of retainers had their heads chopped off and were replaced by others more devoted to their work!

By comparison with Chepstow or Coucy (the Coucy, that is, of eight years ago!) or its other famous West European contemporaries, Avala Castle seems small and rough. It has none of the marks of elaborate workmanship which distinguish some of the later Turkish erections in northern Serbia, such as Semendria, whose romantic castellated walls are reflected in the shallow stretches of the Danube. The stones of which it is built, however, are big enough to excite wonder as to how they were gotten into place, and evidently it was capable of good defense against the bands of pre-artillery days. All around the tumbled masonry is a tangle of raspberry and other less familiar bushes, and every sunny open space is carpeted thick with three-leaved strawberry plants, bearing the sweetest of all Serbia's sweet wild strawberries. It is said that they are particularly luscious because Sharatz delights in these tender plants, and crops them off each summer so that they return new and even sweeter the following spring.

In the centre of the grassy fore-court, which is the favorite place for Belgrade picnickers to spread their lunch, there is, since the war, a small wooden cross and an inscription that can hardly fail to awaken the visitor's liveliest imagination. It is the grave of

a Serbian scout who was caught here on the summit of Avala and shot during one of the early engagements of the war, probably when the Austrians crossed the Danube so over-confidently in the fall of 1914, only to be forced into disastrous retreat by the armies of canny Voivode Mishitch. On the plain cross is the inscription, scrawled by some more than usually generous foe, *Ein unbekannter serbischer Soldat*.

This is Serbia's Westminster Abbey. This is Serbia's Arc de Triomphe. Here on the top of her sacred mountain lie the remains of her Unknown Warrior. From here, surrounded by the memories of her bold and unhappy past, she can face the east and see where at last rises, or seems to rise, the sun of a long-promised better day.

Here to the peak of Avala will come the children of the future, here will be laid the nosegays of acacia and wild pansies of holiday makers, here will pause for a moment those whose sons and husbands lie in some unknown grave, in the valley of the Vardar or at Rudnik or among the crags of Albania or in the fever camps of Corfu or under the sands of Macedonia. Te Deums cannot be sung nor can troops defile here in honor of Serbia's *cheecha*. He will lie as he fell, and he will be honored as are best honored all of Serbia's war heroes, young men and old men and women and children, silently and far removed from all reminders of the civilization of the west.

HAMILTON FISH ARMSTRONG.